

Question Yourself!

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

Perhaps we're in another age of enlightenment, and that would be a great thing. In the last few years, I've seen or heard the following expressions as book titles, on bumper stickers, and in other places:

—What If Everything You Knew Was Wrong—

—Don't Believe Everything You Think—

—Thinking Errors—

And I've recently read two fascinating books: *Sway: The Irresistible Pull of Irrational Behavior* by Ori Brafman and Rom Brafman, and *Mistakes Were Made (But Not By Me): Why We Justify Foolish Beliefs, Bad Decisions, and Hurtful Acts* by Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson. Like the phrases above, these books ask the reader to question assumptions and beliefs. Wendell Johnson's decades-older book, *People in Quandaries: The Semantics of Personal Adjustment*, also encourages us to rethink our beliefs and the language we use. None of these books is specific to disability issues, but each has valuable lessons we can apply.

In the *Sway* book, the authors describe the "diagnosis bias" this way: "...the moment we label a person or a situation, we put on blinders to all evidence that contradicts our diagnosis." They also describe "value attribution," in which we "imbue someone...with certain qualities based on perceived value, rather than on objective data." And they include this quote from psychologist Franz Epting about what happens when people are labeled: "It's easy to start acting it out as a way of being in the world...And then it becomes quite a tangle between what's really going on with us versus what we have been labeled with."

In the *Mistakes Were Made* book, the authors share this profound wisdom: "...if we have enslaved members of another group, deprived them of decent education or jobs, kept them from encroaching on our professional turfs, or denied them their human rights, then we evoke stereotypes about them to justify our actions. By convincing ourselves that they are unworthy, unteachable, incompetent, inherently math-challenged, immoral, sinful, stupid, or even

subhuman, we avoid feeling guilty or unethical about how we treat them. And we certainly avoid feeling that we are prejudiced." They also describe the "confirmation bias" this way: "Once a detective decides that he or she has found the killer, the confirmation bias sees to it that the prime suspect becomes the only suspect."

Finally, in the *People in Quandaries* book, author Wendell Johnson states, "To talk of a person as belonging to this or that type, or possessing this or that quality, seldom does justice to the complexity and ever-changing character of the facts about him." Expanding on the labeling issue, Johnson writes, "When our classification, or labeling, of an individual determines, entirely and without exception, our attitudes and reaction toward that individual, our behavior is scarcely distinguishable from the behavior of Pavlov's dogs." And consider this gem from Johnson, who was a renowned professor at the University of Iowa, a speech pathologist, a psychologist, and a person who had a stutter: "There are some individuals who practically never ask a question. It seems not to occur to them that their information may be incomplete... Alfred Binet, the creator of the modern intelligence test, stressed the significance of self-criticism in his attempts to define intelligence."

So...*what if* everything we thought we knew about people with disabilities was wrong? What if we stopped *believing* everything we *think*? And what if we acknowledged, and then corrected, our *errors in thinking*? What are the implications of these issues for those of us who care about people with disabilities? What are the implications for people with disabilities? All of this is a lot to chew on...

How *does* a person's label or diagnosis affect our attitudes about and our actions toward the person? Do we put "blinders" on and see only the perceived limitations that accompany the diagnosis, ignoring positive and/or hopeful attributes or possibilities? Are our reactions automatic, like "Pavlov's dogs"?

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How does “value attribution”—rather than “objective data”—impact our attitudes and actions? How, for example, does a diagnosis like “mental retardation” influence how we treat a person who has been given that diagnosis? Do we use assessments or evaluations to prove what we already believe to be true, or do we use them to discover new information? Have we ever questioned the results of assessment? What if they’re wrong? Do we ever question a person’s diagnosis or what that diagnosis means? And do we value/devalue this person over that person, based primarily on their diagnoses? Are those diagnosed “severe/profound” of less value than those diagnosed “mild/moderate”?

How many of us “evoke stereotypes” about people to “justify our actions”? How many, for example, think they “know” that students in the “EBD [emotional-behavioral disorder] classroom” could “never” be in general ed classrooms? The EBD stereotype we embrace justifies our decision to segregate those students. Or, how many people operate from the “fact” that someone with an IQ below 70 could “never” live on his own? When we engage in actions that are harmful to others—like segregating people with disabilities, punishing them in the name of “treatment,” and more—and then justify these actions through the use of stereotypes, *what does this do to the core of our souls? (And what about the souls of people with disabilities?)* What might happen if we no longer embraced any stereotypes?

How many of us adhere to the “confirmation bias”? If we “know” a person’s diagnosis, does everything we “see” about the person “confirm” the diagnosis? What if we looked with new eyes, and recognized, for example, that a child is doing this-or-that *because he’s four*, and not because he has autism; or that an adult’s “inappropriate behavior” is situational—*he doesn’t like what’s happening to him right now*—and the behavior is not a consequence of his diagnosis. What if we welcomed the “complexity and ever-changing character” of each unique individual?

What about people with disabilities? What effect does labeling have on the person who is labeled? Could a person’s difficulties actually be the result of the person trying to fit in the “mold created by the diagnosis,” and not the actual diagnosis? Many people with disabilities are “placed”—*immersed*—with others who share the same or similar diagnosis, in special ed classrooms, residential facilities, and other settings. When immersed this way, we shouldn’t be surprised at how many people then learn “how to have more” autism, cognitive disabilities, behavioral diagnoses, etc.

**Our language does
our thinking for us.**

Wendell Johnson

How many opportunities are lost to a person with a disability because of the “blindness” we wear when we fall under the “irrational force” of the “diagnosis bias”?

How does our valuation of (and subsequent treatment of) a person with a disability affect *his perception of his own value and worth as a human being*? How many parents allow their dreams for their children to evaporate because of the “diagnosis bias” and the value they associate with the diagnosis?

These are some of the questions we can ask ourselves—I hope you’ll think of more. As the parent of a young man with a disability, I learned very early to question the experts’ negative predictions about my son’s future. Questioning *their* beliefs, however, helped me realize the value in questioning *my own* beliefs. This, in turn, led me to an on-going study of thinking, philosophy, language, and more. And that leads to a final musing about the excerpts above: do we ask enough questions, is our “information incomplete,” and are we willing to try “self-criticism”? I’ll never be 100 percent there; it’s a life-long, self-reflective journey that requires time spent on being still...thinking...and questioning... But these are not what most of us seem to value. We cherish ACTION! Perhaps, however, our *actions* could be more virtuous and principled, we could have a more positive impact on the lives of people with disabilities, and our souls could reach a higher level of consciousness, if we spent more time being still...thinking...and questioning ourselves...